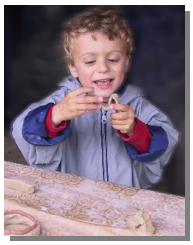
Ten Lessons the Arts Teach

by Elliot Eisner

The arts teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships.

Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, in the arts, it is judgment rather than rules that prevail. How qualities interact, whether in sight or sound, whether through prose or poetry, whether in the choreographed movement we call dance or in an actor's lines and gestures-these relationships matter. They cannot be neglected, they are the means through which the work becomes expressive.

The school curriculum is heavily weighted towards subject matter that gives students the illusion that rightness means correctness and that getting things right always depends upon fealty to rule; spelling, arithmetic, writing as they are usually taught are largely mimetic or rule abiding. Not so the arts. The arts are most conspicuous in their insistence that relationships are central and that good relationships are achieved when the mind works in the service of feeling.



The arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer.

If they do anything, the arts embrace diversity of outcome. Standardization of solution and uniformity of response is no virtue in the arts. While the teacher of spelling is not particularly interested in promoting the student's ingenuity, the arts teacher seeks it.

The arts celebrate multiple perspectives.

One of their large lessons is that there are many ways to see and interpret the world. This too is a lesson that is seldom taught in our schools. The multiple-choice objective test is an encomium to the single correct answer. That's what makes the test "objective." It is not objective because of the way the test items were selected; it is objective because of the way they are scored. It makes no allowance in scoring for the scorer to exercise judgment, that's why machines can do it.

The arts teach children that in complex forms of problem solving purposes are seldom fixed, but change with circumstances and opportunity. Learning in the arts requires the ability and a willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds.

At its best, work in the arts is not a monologue delivered by the artist to the work, but a dialogue. It is a conversation with materials, a conversation punctuated with all of the surprises and uncertainty that really stimulating conversation makes possible. In the arts one looks for surprise, surprise that redefines goals; purposes are held flexibly. The aim is more than impressing into a material what you already know, but discovering what you don't.

The arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we can know.

Put simply, the limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition.

The reduction of knowing to the quantifiable and the literal is too high a price to pay for defining the conditions of knowledge. What we come to know through literature, poetry and the arts is not reducible to the literal.

The arts teach students that small differences can have large effects.

The arts traffic in subtleties. Paying attention to subtleties is not typically a dominant mode of perception in the ordinary course of our lives. We typically see in order to recognize rather than to explore the nuances of a visual field; how many of us here have really seen the façade of our own house? I suspect few. One test is to try to draw it. We tend to look *at* our house or *for* our house in order to know if we have arrived home, or to decide if it needs to be painted, or to determine if anyone's there. Seeing its visual qualities and their relationships is much less common.

The arts teach students to think through and within a material.

All art forms employ some means through which images become real. In music it is patterned sound; in dance it is the expressive movement of a dancer in motion; in the visual arts it is visual form on a canvas, a block of granite, a sheet of steel or aluminum; in theater it's a complex of speech, movement and set. Each of these art forms uses materials that impose upon those using them a certain set of constraints. They make certain demands. They also provide an array of affordances.

Materials offer distinctive opportunities. To realize such opportunities, the child must be able to convert a material into a medium. For this to occur, the child must learn to think within the affordances and constraints of a material and to employ techniques to make the conversion of a material into a medium possible. A material is not the same as a medium or vice versa. Material is the stuff you work with. A medium is something that mediates. What does something mediate? It mediates the choices, decisions, ideas and images that the individual has. The problem for the child is to take some material—drawings, paintings, sculptures—and think within the constraints and affordances of that material the shape that image needs to take.

The arts help children learn to say what cannot be said.

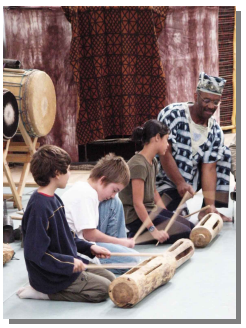
When children are invited to disclose what a work of art helps them feel, they must reach into their poetic capacities to find the words that will do the job.

Talk about the arts makes some special demands on those who speak about them. Think, for a moment, about what is required to describe the qualities of a jazz saxophone solo by John Coltrane, the surface of a painting by Helen Frankenthaler or the expressive character of a bronze sculpture by Barbara Hepworth. The task is not to replicate in language the qualities these works possess because clearly no such replication is possible. It is rather to imply through language qualities that are themselves ineffable, hence the trick is say what cannot be said. It is here that innuendo and connotation are among our strongest allies. It is here that the most powerful of linguistic capacities, metaphor, comes to the rescue.

The arts enable us to have experience we can have from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling.

Some works of art have the capacity to put us into another world. So stirring is the journey that we surrender to where the work takes us. Such experiences are not the common stock-in-trade of the average eight-year-old. We wish to help them learn how to read—and create—such images. In short, we want to help them acquire the forms of literacy that will give them access to such work and to the joy, delight and insight they make possible. If this is elitism then we should try to expand the elite.

The arts' position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important.



The curriculum of the school shapes children's thinking. It is a mind altering device; it symbolizes what adults believe is important for the young to know, what is important to be good at. It tells the young which human aptitudes are important to possess. It gives or denies children opportunities to learn how to think in certain ways.

The value of a subject of study is not only a function of its presence in the curriculum; it is also a function of the amount of time the school devotes to it. Indeed, the most telling index of the importance of a field of study is not found in school district testimonies, but in the amount of times it receives and when it is taught in the school day and week. Add to these considerations the relationship between what is tested and what is regarded as important and you have a recipe for defining what counts in school.

Adapted from: Eisner, E. (2002). The Arts and the Creation of Mind, In Chapter 4, *What the Arts Teach and How It Shows.* (pp.70-92). Yale University Press. Available from NAEA Publications.

Text abstracted from NAEA's pamphlet, *Parents: Ten Lessons the Arts Teach.* For more information call (703) 860-8000 or visit www.naea-reston.org.